

Understanding the Role of the Paraprofessional in Special Education

A Collaborative Guide for Supporting Students, Promoting Independence, and Strengthening Inclusive Practices

Purpose & Overview

This guide supports teachers, paraprofessionals, and school teams in understanding the important role paraprofessionals play in supporting students with disabilities. Paraprofessionals are valuable members of the educational team who help provide instructional, behavioral, social, and functional support to students throughout the school day.

When roles and responsibilities are clearly defined, paraprofessionals can effectively support student learning while promoting independence and inclusion. However, without proper guidance, paraprofessionals may unintentionally provide too much assistance, create student dependence, or assume responsibilities that belong to certified instructional staff.

The purpose of this guide is to clarify the role of the paraprofessional, establish effective collaboration practices, and ensure student support promotes long-term success and independence.

Instructional Outcomes

Effective use of this guide helps educators:

- ✓ Understand the responsibilities of paraprofessionals
- ✓ Clarify the distinction between teacher and paraprofessional roles
- ✓ Improve collaboration and communication
- ✓ Promote student independence
- ✓ Support implementation of accommodations and interventions
- ✓ Strengthen inclusive educational practices

Understanding the Role of the Paraprofessional

Paraprofessionals provide support under the supervision and direction of certified instructional staff.

Their role is to assist in implementing instructional plans, accommodations, behavior supports, and classroom routines while helping students access learning opportunities.

Paraprofessionals may support students in:

- Academic activities
- Social interactions
- Behavioral regulation
- Communication
- Organization
- Daily living skills
- Classroom participation
- Transitions throughout the school day

Important Consideration

Paraprofessionals support instruction, they do not replace the teacher.

Instructional planning, grading, IEP development, progress reporting, and educational decision-making remain the responsibility of certified staff.

What Paraprofessionals Should Do

<i>Responsibility Area</i>	<i>Examples</i>
<i>Academic Support</i>	Reinforce teacher-directed instruction, assist with assignments, support small-group activities
<i>Accommodation Implementation</i>	Help students access accommodations outlined in the IEP or 504 Plan
<i>Behavioral Support</i>	Reinforce behavior expectations and support behavior intervention plans
<i>Classroom Supervision</i>	Monitor student engagement and participation during activities
<i>Communication Support</i>	Assist students using communication systems and visual supports
<i>Data Collection</i>	Collect data as directed by the teacher or support team

<i>Independence Building</i>	Encourage students to complete tasks with decreasing levels of support
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These responsibilities help students access instruction while supporting classroom success.

What Paraprofessionals Should NOT Do

Teachers should ensure paraprofessionals understand the limits of their role.

Examples include:

- Developing IEP goals
- Making placement decisions
- Teaching new concepts without teacher direction
- Determining accommodations independently
- Conducting parent conferences independently
- Making disciplinary decisions
- Modifying curriculum without teacher guidance

Clear role expectations help protect compliance and ensure students receive appropriate support.

High-Impact Practices for Effective Paraprofessional Support

Promote Independence First

One of the most important responsibilities of a paraprofessional is helping students become less dependent on adult support over time.

Ask:

"How can I help this student do more independently?"

rather than

"How can I do this for the student?"

Follow Teacher Direction

Consistency is critical.

Paraprofessionals should understand:

- Classroom expectations
- Instructional goals
- Accommodation requirements
- Behavior plans
- Reinforcement systems

Use Least-to-Most Prompting

Provide only the level of support needed.

Examples:

1. Visual cue
2. Verbal reminder
3. Gesture
4. Direct assistance

This approach encourages student independence and confidence.

Maintain Student Dignity

Support should be provided respectfully and discreetly whenever possible.

Students should feel supported not singled out.

Effective Teacher-Paraprofessional Collaboration

Collaboration Practice	What It Supports	Example
Daily Communication	Consistency	Brief discussion before instruction begins
Shared Expectations	Student success	Reviewing classroom routines and goals
Regular Feedback	Professional growth	Teacher provides guidance and coaching
Problem Solving	Student support	Discussing challenges and identifying solutions
Data Sharing	Progress monitoring	Reviewing student performance together
Independence Planning	Long-term success	Identifying opportunities to fade support

Strong communication creates a unified support system for students.

Classroom Scenario

Situation

A paraprofessional works closely with Olivia, a fifth-grade student with a learning disability. Throughout the day, the paraprofessional frequently provides answers, completes portions of assignments, and reminds Olivia of every step in a task.

Although Olivia completes work successfully, she struggles when the paraprofessional is absent and rarely attempts tasks independently.

Team Response

The teacher and paraprofessional meet to discuss ways to increase independence.

Together they:

- Use visual checklists
- Reduce unnecessary prompts
- Implement least-to-most prompting
- Encourage problem-solving
- Allow additional wait time before assisting

Outcome

Over time, Olivia begins initiating tasks independently, requiring fewer prompts and demonstrating greater confidence in her abilities.

Teacher Implementation Reflection

When working with paraprofessionals, educators may consider:

- ☐ Are paraprofessional responsibilities clearly defined?
- ☐ Does the paraprofessional understand student accommodations and supports?

- ☐ Is support promoting independence rather than dependence?
- ☐ Are communication systems in place?
- ☐ Is feedback provided regularly?
- ☐ Are student dignity and inclusion being maintained?
- ☐ Are instructional decisions remaining under teacher supervision?

Ongoing reflection helps ensure paraprofessional support remains effective and student-centered.

Supporting Student Independence

The ultimate goal of paraprofessional support is increased student independence.

Over time, students should be supported in learning to:

- ✓ Follow routines independently
- ✓ Use accommodations appropriately
- ✓ Solve problems with minimal assistance
- ✓ Advocate for their needs
- ✓ Complete academic tasks independently
- ✓ Build confidence and self-management skills
- ✓ Participate fully in classroom activities

Successful support should gradually decrease as student independence increases.

Connection to IEP Implementation and Student Success

Paraprofessionals often play an important role in supporting:

- Accommodation implementation
- Behavior intervention plans

- Communication supports
- Social skills development
- Academic engagement
- Data collection
- Classroom participation
- Independence goals

When teachers and paraprofessionals work collaboratively, students receive more consistent and effective support throughout the school day.
